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AUTHOR Stein, Sondra G.
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ABSTRACT

The Women's Educational and Vocational Enrichment program (WEAVE) has been conducted in two poor sections of Boston to help women move from dependence on welfare to gainful employment. Most of the women served by the program are black and most have not finished high school. About 42 percent of the women have never had paid employment, while most of the others have had only low-skill, low-paying jobs for short periods of time. The program begins with approximately three months of daily education, which focuses on building confidence and building peer support networks as well as building skills in reading, writing, mathematics, and problem solving. By discussing possible obstacles to learning publicly, the women begin to see these as shared problems, rather than individual ones. They unlearn old habits and develop new strategies for coping. At the end of three months, most women are ready to move on to the second phase of WEAVE's program, which combines continued Internship Programs; office jobs at social service agencies where the women feel comfortable. The women continue classes to get their high school diplomas. This part of the program is contracted for with the Commonwealth Service Corps. Successful completion of the program prepares the women to move on to a real job. (KC)

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WOMEN, INC.
WEAVE (Women's Educational and Vocational Enrichment)
244 TOWNSEND STREET
ROXBURY, MASSACHUSETTS 02121
(617) 427-0680

ED251679

WHAT WOMEN WANT:

THE EVOLUTION OF A COMPETENCY-BASED JOB READINESS PROGRAM FOR WOMEN OUT OF WORK

Sondra G. Stein

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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PRESENTED AT THE EIGHTH ANNUAL NATIONAL COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION INVITATIONAL CONFERENCE, NEW YORK CITY, NOVEMBER 29, 1983.

When I responded to the Call for Papers for this Conference I entitled my proposal "What Women Want:" The Evolution of a Competency-Based Job Readiness Program for Women Out of Work." I chose that title because in the three years since WEAVE began I've met lots of people concerned with getting poor women off welfare and into the workforce. When you talk to these people - and they range from educators like us, through social workers, and corporate representatives, to politicians of all sorts - you quickly find out that they assume that they have to trick or bribe or manipulate or force women to get off welfare. And the programs and tactics they come up with for getting women into education and training reflect that assumption: they offer them stipends or threaten them with loss of their welfare checks. Penalize them for missing days or reward them for being on time. All of these tactics are based on the assumption that women on welfare <u>like</u> being on welfare and, in fact, make out o.k.

Now in the three years I've been Director of WEAVE I've met over 300 women on welfare - and none of them liked being on welfare and none of them were making out o.k. And while some surely needed and received threats or bribes to get them to our door, every single woman I have ever met <u>wanted</u> to get off welfare and change her life.

If this is what women want, why don't more of them do it? What are the barriers that stand in the way of a woman making the changes she wants and needs to make in her life? These are the questions we asked at WEAVE when we began to design our program - a program which, from the beginning, was conceived as a transitional job readiness program. Over the years we have been able to define more precisely what these barriers are: the task we struggle

with - and this is a task that all of us adult educators are faced with - is discovering more and more effective means of overcoming or tearing down or avoiding those barriers so that women can effect the transition they want and need to make in their lives.

What are these means? This is what I want to share with you today. But before I explain the step-by-step transition we structure at WEAVE, let me tell you a little about who we serve, what the obstacles to change are for them, and how our program has evolved to help women recognize and overcome those barriers.

WEAVE, formally known as Women's Educational and Vocational Enrichment, had an unusual beginning for an educational/vocational program. It was conceived by and funded through the efforts of staff at Women, Inc., a model residential alcohol and drug treatment program that has been serving addicted women and their families since 1974. For women leaving treatment, often after a year or more, the transition was too abrupt from the supportive, confrontive atmosphere in group residence to the individualist, make-it-on-your-own ethos they met in the classrooms, training programs, and work sites. WEAVE was designed as a bridge between these two worlds, a supportive, highly structured place where they could brush up on skills and make concrete, realistic plans for buildiing a drug-free, self-sufficient lifestyle for themselves and their families.

As it turned out, the design of the program was also appropriate for those women who live in the communities where the program is based, who have been on welfare for a number of years, who have never finished high school, who have no job skills, and who therefore have histories of chronic unemploy-

ment. Since Roxbury and Dorchester, the neighborhoods in Boston where Women, Inc.'s programs are based, have the highest rates of unemployment and underemployment, criminal activity and substance abuse in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, there are hundreds, even thousands of women who need the kind of job-readiness programming WEAVE offers. And many have already come to us in the three years we have been open.

Of the total of all participants who enrolled in WEAVE classes, 87% were Black, 7% Hispanic, and 6% White. They ranged in age from 19 to 55 (average age 28), were responsible for the care of two to eight children, with the majority of these single parents raising two or three.

Twenty-five percent of the women who come to WEAVE either completed high school or received their GED; the average years of school completed by the remaining 75% were 7.85. Neither number accurately reflects the skill level of program participants, for even those with high school diplomas enter the program with substantially below eighth grade reading, writing and math skills. Older participants tend to attribute their poor educational background to Southern, segregated school systems. Participants under 30, again and again reported experiences in which they were labeled "dumb" or "troublemaker" and flunked or passed until they were out of school without ever having received the education they needed to compete in the job market. As a result, most lack the reading comprehension, the writing, and the number literacy skills to be able to carry out basic life maintenance tasks from shopping for food and clothing, to reading an apartment lease, to helping their children with school work. They are "functionally illiterate."

The economic consequences of this lack of functional literacy are perhaps the clearest to discern. Eighty percent of these women are recipients

of AFDC or General Relief, with 42% having no history of paid employment. The majority have had sporadic three to six month periods of employment as homemakers, health homemakers, dietary aides, cleaners and factory workers. These "secondary labor force" jobs, however, are the ones that provide the least job security and the least financial remuneration or other benefits. They are the jobs that result in women being 53% of those in the full time labor force making less than $5,000 per year. Unable to care for their family's needs on this salary and, thanks to Reagan's cutbacks in eligibility for foodstamps and medicaid, unable to supplement their salary, these women end up on welfare.

And welfare department policies that try to move recipients as quickly as possible into the world of work, send women into these same kinds of marginal, minimum wage, secondary labor force jobs. These programs - whether Workfare, Jobs Clubs or Supported Work - can't resolve the problem of chronic unemployment, because they don't address either the underlying problem of functional illiteracy, or it's effect on individual women's ability to cope with poverty.

According to the Report of the National Advisory Council on Economic Opportunity,

> ... On a checklist of 91 life events requiring change and readjustment, most community surveys have shown that individuals experience an average of two such events a year. In contrast, single mothers in a Boston study of 43 Black and White low income women reported an average of 14 such events during the past two years.[1]

These events include: loss of housing due to fire or eviction; family illness (especially of children) resulting from inadequate nutrition, inadequate preventive care, inadequate heating, and unsafe housing conditions (lead paint, leaks, rodents, cockroaches); unplanned pregnancy; domestic violence; alcohol-

ism and drug abuse[2]; problems with children's behavior and placement at school, involvement of teenagers with crime and substance abuse. The "catch 22" here is that since these events are the consequence of a lack of resources, and since substantial resources, skills and support are necessary to cope with such events, those female-headed families that have the most need to cope are least able to do so. And it is not just a lack of skills and resources (though this is severe) that interferes. From bumping so hard so many times against the limits of poverty, against racial and sexual discrimination, nearly all of these single-parent women have given up the belief in themselves and in their capacity to do something - anything - to actively change their lives.

And still they come, wanting to change. To succeed - to turn around their histories of failure and build a history of small successes, to unlearn the habits of failure and learn the skill of minimizing and anticipating crisis, of creating some kind of choice out of bare necessity - these are processes that take time: never less than a year, usually more.

At WEAVE, we give women that time, demand they take it for themselves. Our program starts with an intensive 12-week, 20 hour per week competency-based education program. The intensity of the program structure requires that women change their daily habits, that they make themselves and their education first priority. They need to be at school from nine to two, four days a week, for at least the first three months they are at WEAVE.

From the first, we focus on what it means to make this kind of shift in how you live your daily life, trying to head off those two major causes of failure for women I've already mentioned: the history and continued expectation of failure, on the one hand; and, on the other, the conditions that give rise

to it, the repeated life events requiring change and readjustment. On the first day of school we look at fears and expectations; on the second, we ask the women to name the instabilities in their lives that may disrupt their education. By discussing these issues from the start -- in class, as a group -- we make clear that they are appropriate to the classroom, not separate from it.

Indeed, the focus of this first three month period at WEAVE is building confidence and building peer support networks as well as building skills in reading, writing, math and problem-solving. By discussing possible obstacles to learning publicly, the women begin to see these as shared problems, rather than individual ones. If other women's lives are disrupted by the same fears, the same problems with schools, kids, lovers, and landlords, then, perhaps, having those problems is not proof of one's own inherent incapacity, but a symptom of something larger. While this doesn't make the problems any less real, any less in need of solutions, it does make responsibility for them less a tragic flaw and frees a woman to look around for solutions outside of herself and to feel a little better about her own capabilities. Opening up classroom space to discuss obstacles to learning has even more important long term benefits in terms of breaking old habits of reaction to fear and change, and this includes the initial reaction of dropping out -- of retreating back to one's family -- when something at WEAVE kicks up old negative feelings about one's incapacity to learn.

I'm sure the importance of breaking these old habits is clear to all of you: if women don't begin to unlearn the habits of failure by replacing them with new strategies for dealing with crisis and the unknown -- and I include in my definition of the unknown all the paraphernalia of learning, from dic-

tionaries to tests, to libraries, as well as all the people in positions of authority, from social workers to police, to school principals, who have control over some portion of their lives, and all the disruptive life events we mentioned earlier -- if women don't learn tnat they are capable of generating new strategies for dealing with these new and old unknowns -- then we can't help them move on to what they really want to feel good about: doing good, useful work.

Our primary goal, then, in this first three months, is to teach women new, more effective problem-solving strategies, and this includes being able to name the problem -- even to anticipate it; being able to identify a range of possible resources for addressing the problem; and being able to evaluate the relative effectiveness of those resources. Who's going to be a reliable caretaker for your kids while you're in school? What should you do if they're sick and can't go to daycare? How can you get younger and older kids to help with chores? These are family problems that can disrupt a woman's education; they are also problems that she can anticipate and turn to her sister students for possible solutions to.

Again, there are several positive results to this shared resource building. First and, most obviously, the woman who gets help learns that it's o.k. to turn to others, that she doesn't have to come up with all the answers herself, and this is crucial for single parents who too often believe they have to be all things to their kids and can't afford to rely on anyone. (How crucial this is is made clear by several studies that show single parents with strong support networks are most successful in dealing with crisis and change.) Secondly, the woman who gives help gets a boost to her own self-esteem because she has been able to contribute something valuable to someone else. So

both women are learning new strategies for problem-solving that leave them better prepared for the future in two ways: not only have they begun to resolve problems that might interfere with work, but they have begun to build long term peer support networks to carry them through the changes that lie ahead.

At the end of three months, most women are ready to move on to the second phase of WEAVE's program, which combines continued classroom education with a workplace internship. Our experience with this model began at a time very early in our own development as a program when we believed that the transition from home to work would be much shorter than the year we now allow and expect. At that time, we were ready to place women into employment or CETA-type classroom training at the end of three months. The women, however, were not ready. And we had clear proof of their change in self-esteem and problem-solving ability, in their articulate and firm expression of what they wanted and needed.

They were, they said, just beginning to feel comfortable in the classroom and they needed that familiar ground to stay beneath their feet as they made the transition to the world of work. They also needed a safe, practice situation in which they could begin to learn what actually went on in a workplace, because at their age, they felt awkward being as uncomfortable and as unfamiliar as they were in this environment. From what I've already said about needing to build a history of small successes to replace a history of failure, about building self-esteem and learning new problem-solving skills, you know how much we learned at WEAVE from the women who have come here and how seriously we considered what they told us.

The question was how to develop the internship program. At that time, we knew of no models that fit our needs, precisely. We were, afterall, an educational program, and our only direct experience, in the employment and training area, was with "shadowing" -- sending women out to spend the day with someone working in a field of employment they were considering. We were familiar with on-the-job training programs for people who were more job ready than our women were, and with combination work-and-education programs for teenagers like Jobs for Youth. The types of work experience involved in these models didn't seem appropriate to our needs, however. Supported work was closest in concept to what we wanted, and yet, in practice, it seemed that women didn't get the supervision and support they needed. Rather than gradually immersing women into a workplace environment, supported work seemed to plunk them right down in the middle of it -- and let them sink or swim. We wanted to be sure that all our women learned how to swim.

We began by developing office internships at human service agencies -- places where women would feel comfortable because they were familiar and because they were places where there was a history of paraprofessional workers. Our own program, our day care center, and two other agencies where we knew the staff well,were our first sites as we began to work out a model of gradual, supervised immersion into the world of work.

The women who were participating went out to their worksites in the morning and, in the afternoon, came to class, where they were able both to discuss with peers this new work experience and to continue building the skills they needed to get their high school diploma. Our program job developer met regularly with the on-site supervisor and with both the supervisor and the WEAVE participant to discuss progress and problems in each woman's specific

internship, and to work out the perameters of the model. Our Advisory Board -- composed of representatives of the employment and training community as well as area employers -- helped us develop and market our model. They helped us think through the distinctions we should make between nonprofit and for-profit placements (distinctions that have led us to concentrate at present on non-profit placements) and to develop a system for contracting with and evaluating internship placement sites.

And then, at a state budget hearing, I found out about a program buried in the Massachusetts Executive Office of Communities and Development called the Commonwealth Service Corps which seemed to provide the system we needed to legitimize our model. CSC (Commonwealth Service Corps) is a program that came into existence as part of the Welfare Rights Movement of the 60's -- and miraculously survived -- partly because it had only a small budget, partly because of the dedication of the two women who run it. Basically what CSC provides is a small stipend, one that does not effect a woman's welfare check, for work in a nonprofit community agency. Initially, the program had been a way to enable grassroots, welfare rights and tenants groups to get some "paid" staff. Over the years, however, in response to both changing times and changing needs of the welfare mothers CSC served, the program had evolved into a 30-hour per week combination work experience and classroom education and training program: a model almost exactly like what we were creating.

The fit, so far, has been perfect: we contract with CSC every year for a certain number of slots. These slots hook us into the welfare system, providing women who participate with a stipend of $110.00 per month and, just as important, with a legitimate exemption from the Job Clubs run through the Department of Welfare's Employment and Training Program. Our job is to provide

appropriate placements in nonprofit organizations, to monitor the placements, to make sure that the women are getting real training, and to provide support services and classroom education.

The classroom education we provide is preparation for the competency-based External Diploma Program -- the New York State model. I haven't said much yet about the specific skills education we provide at WEAVE and don't have time now. Let me just reiterate that our curriculum is competency-based and designed to develop in women the understanding and skills they need to manage their family life competently and to demonstrate that competence on the lifeskills tasks associated with this diploma program. In order for a woman to move into stage two of our program -- the combined work experience internship and education -- she needs to have developed the reading, writing, computation and job readiness skills she will need to perform appropriately at a worksite and to begin work on the External Diploma Program (EDP). The skills necessary for these two components are well matched and will match even more closely in the near future, since the Boston School Department intends to adopt a service learning internship as one of the options for demonstrating the individualized competency required for the EDP.

These two components are well matched in duration, too. The CSC slots are good for six to nine months, enough time for a woman to get comfortable in the workplace. Completion of the diploma program takes five to six months for most women. As they prove their competence on each of the five tasks, their self-confidence builds, increasing their willingness to take on new responsibilities in their internships. Finally, just as they are ending their internships, they have a clear vision of their own capability: they have earned their high school diploma.

Armed with this achievement they never really thought was possible backed by a string of small successes accrued over a nine month to one year period, the women are ready to move on to the next stage of their development: a real job, where they can earn the kind of wages that will enable them to support their families and contribute to the economic and social development of their communities.